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## The Influence of Traditional Peri-urban Villages on Improving the Mental Wellness of Urban Residents: A Case Study of Dapeng District, Shenzhen City

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### Abstract

Urban residents tend to suffer from mental issues resulted from problems such as fast-paced lifestyle, over-crowdedness and environmental pollution, thus demanding for places to release pressure and keep balance. Featuring high accessibility as well as different landscape and cultural experience, traditional peri-urban villages have become the ideal tourism destinations for urban residents. In order to explore the influence of these villages on the mental wellness of urban residents, this study conducts an empirical study in Dapeng District of Shenzhen City. In this study, 100 randomly selected urban visitors to the district are invited to recall their itineraries and emotional feelings on prepared maps. Specifically they are asked to circle the villages they have visited, describe the main tourism images, and express their feelings to these images. Through analyzing the data collected from the mapping survey, the following two findings can be concluded. Firstly, in terms of tourism routes, urban visitors tend to visit villages with similar resources if the length of stay is within two days, on the other hand, if the length is longer they prefer villages with different themes. Secondly, besides cultural and natural tourism resources, the level of supporting tourism resources, especially infrastructure and service facilities, is very important in shaping tourists' positive traveling feelings. Therefore, it is suggested that measures should be given priority to preserve the authenticity of inherited resources, to improve the provision of supporting facilities, to promote coordination between different villages and village clusters, and to arrange people-oriented tourism routes.

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**Keywords:** Traditional Peri-urban Villages; Mapping Survey; Mental Wellness; Dapeng District

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## 1. Introduction and research context

### 1.1. Long-term exposure to fast-paced urban environment can threaten the mental wellness of residents

In nowadays China, many developing cities are being troubled by various urban problems, such as environmental pollution, over-crowdedness and traffic congestion. Especially, in first-tier cities, such as Shenzhen, living cost has become increasingly high and employment competition has been increasingly fierce. People have to push themselves into hectic daily work to make a living. Due to long-time exposure to the fast-paced urban lifestyle, residents suffer from mental pressure and negative emotion to different extents. If the accumulated pressure cannot be released properly, people will eventually lose their mental wellness. According to the research made by Buzzell and Chalquist (2010), reconnecting with nature and slowing down pace of life are highly effective for urban residents to keep mental balance. However, it is unlikely for urban residents to make long-distance trips, considering the fact that they do not have enough vacation time all year round. Thus, in this sense, traditional peri-urban villages can satisfy the above-stated demand because of easy accessibility and rich tourism endowment. These villages have the potential to become the ideal tourism destinations for urban residents who plan to pay a short visit.

### 1.2. Traditional peri-urban villages serve as places where urban residents can experience different lifestyles

Facing great pressure of urban expansion, a majority of peri-urban villages in Shenzhen area have conducted high-density real estate development in recent years. Among them are some traditional villages with great preservation value. Irrational development has endangered their distinctive history, cultural heritage and identity. In spite of this, there are still a number of traditional peri-urban villages that have become the exceptions. These villages successfully turn into popular tourism destinations, thanks to the preservation of their unique spatial texture and traditional culture accumulated from long-time history. It is evident that, the tourism-oriented renewal in these villages can not only satisfy the travelling demand of urban residents, but also utilize the authenticity of traditional villages to promote regional development. Aiming at improving their tourism service, the economic structure, social structure and physical environment of traditional peri-urban villages should make corresponding changes. In terms of economic structure, these villages do not only rely on agriculture and manufacturing industry any longer. They start to offer services in tourism, which will make their economy more diverse. In terms of social structure, tourism creates employment opportunities in these villages and substantially raises the income of villagers. In addition, the development of tourism requires urgent improvement in local built environment, including infrastructure, landscape and buildings.

## 2. The characteristics of traditional peri-urban villages

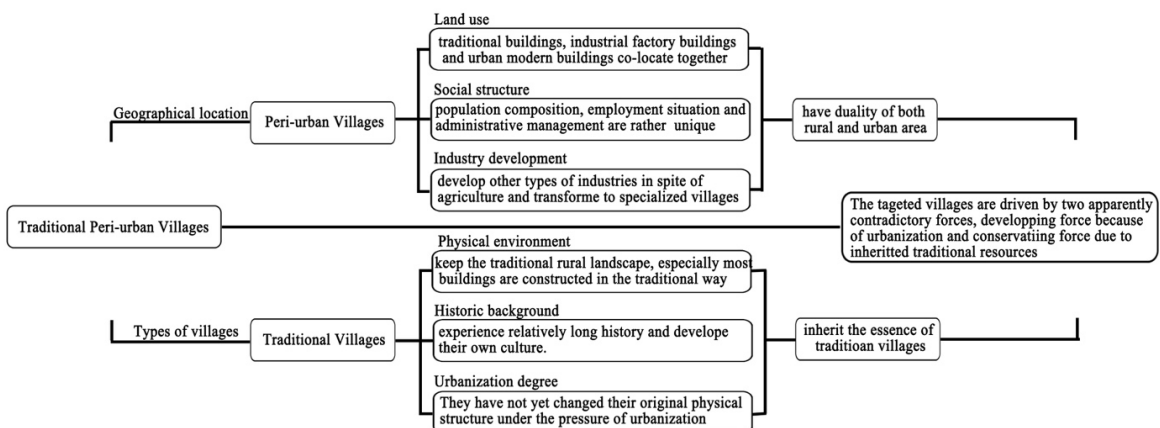


Figure 1. The characteristics of traditional peri-urban villages

To understand the roles of traditional peri-urban villages in improving the mental wellness of urban residents in fast-paced cities, the characteristics of these villages need to be further explored. They are located in the area immediately adjacent to the existing urban agglomeration, which is the nearest place effected by rapid urban expansion. Also, they are the traditional rural settlements with relatively long history, rural landscape and unique culture. The external pressure brought by urbanization and internal resource potential together determine the complex characteristics of traditional peri-urban villages (see Figure1).

### *2.1. The general characteristics as determined by geographical location*

Based on the study of Zhu and Zhou (2009), peri-urban areas are the product of urban expansion. It can be defined as both the fringe of built-up urban areas and the interface space between urban and rural areas. In this area, different social, economic and spatial elements of both rural and urban areas conflict and integrate with each other. Yang, Yu and Xiong (2013) also agree that peri-urban area is the peripheral space of cities where a variety of conflicts between urban and rural areas exist. The peri-urban villages refer to the villages that are located in the peri-urban areas. Due to their geographical location, these villages reflect the duality of both city and the countryside.

Influenced by the tension of both urban sprawl and rural conservation, peri-urban villages are usually characterized by diversity, complexity, integration and dynamic changes. In terms of land use patterns, peri-urban villages are the typical places where a mixture of rural traditional buildings, industrial factory buildings and urban modern buildings co-exist (Sun, 2008). In terms of social structure, the population composition, employment and administrative management in peri-urban villages are also quite unique. For example, the peri-urban villages in Shenzhen tend to become popular settlements for floating population due to low housing rent (Jing, 2006). In terms of industrial patterns, the majority of peri-urban villages develop other types of industry, aside from agriculture. Especially, those villages with unique resources, ideal market environment or high accessibility often outstand to develop into specialized villages. According to the advantageous resources, specialized villages can be divided into those specialized in tourism service, in product processing and in real estate development. The focus of this study is only on those villages specializing in tourism service.

### *2.2. The general characteristics as determined by time-honored traditions*

Wang and Qiao (2008) propose the criteria to judge if a village can be viewed as traditional village. They argue that to qualify as traditional villages, the main component elements of these villages, such as buildings, roads and public space, should be constructed in a way, which is usually inherited through the time-honored folk construction techniques. As long as the traditional spatial texture and function are adopted, these villages can still be regarded as traditional ones even if some modern construction techniques are introduced in individual buildings. Hu, Chen and Cao (2014) define traditional villages as those that were built in history and have still kept the local culture and traditional farming lifestyle to date. Wang (2014), on the other hand, deems that traditional villages should not only refer to those that are approved by the government and enlisted on the Historical and Cultural Villages, but also include those with natural landscape, time-honored culture and favorable ecological environment. As can be seen from the above, the definitions of traditional villages vary among different scholars, depending on their angles of research.

This study defines traditional villages from the macro perspective. Generally, traditional villages targeted in this study demonstrate the following three aspects. Firstly, in terms of physical environment, these villages have still kept the traditional rural landscape which differs completely from the urban environment. Specifically, these villages are in harmony with the surrounding natural endowment, including forests, farmlands and waterbodies, as a whole. The majority of their buildings are constructed in traditional ways. Secondly, in terms of historic background, these villages boast relatively long history and have developed their unique local culture. Thirdly, in terms of urbanization level, these villages have not yet changed their original physical structure under the pressure of urbanization, unlike other peri-urban villages whose lands have been transferred for real estate development. Admittedly, it is inevitable that these villages are influenced by urban expansion. Typically, a large portion of young people have left these villages

to seek employment opportunities and social advancement in cities, and most of the current occupiers are the elderly and new-coming tenants.

### 2.3. The specific characteristics of the targeted villages in Dapeng District

With the above knowledge of the general characteristics, more specific features of traditional villages in Dapeng District will be described in order to make clear the context of case study. Located in the peri-urban area of Shenzhen, Dapeng District is a typical place where many traditional Hakka and Cantonese villages are being severely impacted by the great pressure brought by rapid urbanization. Dapeng District is located at the southeast of Shenzhen City. It consists of three towns, namely, Kuichong Town in the north, Dapeng Town in the middle and Nan'ao Town in the south. The district is in fact a peninsula that is surrounded by the gulf from three sides and connected to the mainland in the northwest direction. In 2004, Shenzhen City Government implemented the overall urbanization policy, which administratively transformed all rural villages into urban communities, including all those in Dapeng District. However, this passive urbanization policy merely changes the forms of administrative governance with limited measures and is inadequate to alter the existing urban-rural dual structure, because the former rural collective ownership of lands does not change essentially before and after the policy. Therefore, many traditional villages in Dapeng District still remain its original conditions.

Table 1. The list of tourism- oriented traditional villages in Dapeng District  
Source: compiled by author based on Wang and Qiao (2008).

Town	Traditional Village Clusters or Individual village	Individual Traditional Villages
Nan'ao Town	Xichong Village Cluster	Hesou, Xiyangwei, Xichong, Xinwu, Yashan, Shagang, Xigong, Getian, Nanshe
	Dongchong Village Cluster	Dongchong, Dawei, Dianzai, Shagang, Shangwei
	Yangmeikeng Village Cluster	Yangmeikeng, Hebei
	The Southeast of Daya Bay	Dongshan, Shapu, Lizhishan, Daqiao, Gaoling
	The Southwest of Daya Bay	Dalingxia, Xinyu, Bizhou, Xiahenggang, Shanghenggang, Pingshanzai
	Individual Village beside Dapeng Bay	Shuitousha
Dapeng Town	Longqi Bay Village Cluster	Jiaochangwei, Dongcun, Tianxincun, Sihe, Songshan, Pengcheng, Wuchong
	Dapeng Bay Village Cluster	Shangwei, Gaowu, Xiawei, Youcaopeng
	Dapeng Bay Village Cluster	Xiantou, Shangdie, Xiadie
Kuichong Town	Baguang Village Cluster	Baishawan, Liaowu, Laowu, Liwu, Shanglingou, Xialouge, Xixiang, Yangchou, Yanzhao, Jiongtou, Baguang, Shanxia, Shigudun, Shangxinwu
	Tuyang Village Cluster	Shayuchong, Guanghu, Tuyang

According to Shenzhen's latest Industrial Space Layout Plan (2011-2020), Dapeng District is envisioned as a tourism-based area with its unique coastal landscape, time-honored history and ideal ecological environment (He, Wang and Zou, 2012). Official statistic figures indicate that the number of tourists to Dapeng District has reached 3 million in 2013, and is expected to grow continuously to 8 million in 2020 (Shenzhen City Government, 2013). In the long run, the Dapeng District will be developed into a world-class eco-tourism resort. In order to realize the goals in this blueprint, the 110 remaining traditional villages, which embody the essence of local culture and landscape, are to play important roles (Wang and Qiao, 2008). Among these villages, 58 villages, belonging to ten village clusters, and one individual village named Shuitousha have already become popular tourism destinations (Table 1). These villages are expected to take the opportunity of regional tourism development to conduct industrial transformation and space renewal. Only in this way can they protect their identity under the great pressure of urbanization, diversify their industries and increase income for local residents.

### 3. Methodology

In order to understand how the visits to those traditional peri-urban villages influenced the mental wellness, 100 randomly selected residents, who lived in the urban area of Shenzhen and who had travelled to the above traditional villages of Dapeng District, were anonymously invited to recall their itineraries and emotional feelings on prepared maps. During the survey, firstly they were asked to circle the villages they had visited on prepared district map, and then wrote down the main tourism images of corresponding villages and used several adjectives or nouns to describe their mental feelings towards different images.

In this study, other necessary background information from the respondents was collected at the same time, such as their age group, length of stay, as well as their personal expectations on the future development of those villages. In this way, the factors that influenced the urban residents to produce positive and negative mental feelings were concluded, which could provide an effective guidance on the planning and construction of these villages in the future. After collecting the edited maps, detailed analysis was conducted in order to generalize some findings. In the process of data analysis, village clusters were treated as the basic study units, because it was discovered that a village cluster, where several individual villages were closely located, was oftentimes treated as a single tourism image by interviewed tourists. Besides, this study also divided the adjectives or nouns that describe the respondents' mental feedbacks into three categories, namely those with positive, negative and neutral connotations.

### 4. Influence of traditional peri-urban village trips on urban residents' mental wellness

#### 4.1. The background information of respondents and basic characteristics of their travelling behavior

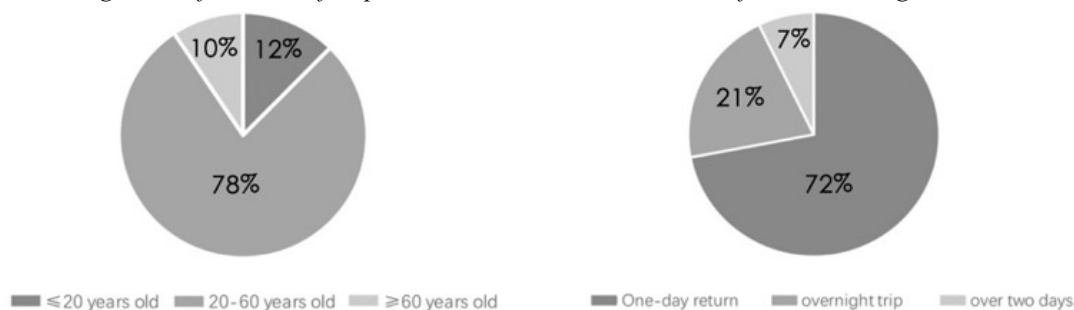


Figure 2. (a) Respondents' age distribution; (b) Respondents' length of stay.

Source: drawn by author

The respondents' age structure is analyzed based on collected maps (see Figure 2 (a)). It is necessary because choices of tourism destinations, travelling intentions and perceptions vary greatly according to age. 78% of survey takers are between 20 and 60 years old. People within this age range constitute the busiest group undertaking heaviest workload. Respondents younger than 20 years old count for 12%, majority of whom are undergraduates with relatively flexible schedule. The remaining 10% are seniors aged above 60 years old and most of them have retired.

According to the collected data, the average length of stay in peri-urban villages is 1.4 days. More specifically, 72% of respondents go for one-day return trip, while 28% of them tend to stay no fewer than two days, including 21% reply stay overnight, and only 7% indicate more than two days (see figure 2(b)). It can be inferred from these figures that the traditional peri-urban villages in Dapeng District currently lack the capabilities to retain visitors for longer travelling time. This is not only due to the insufficient vacation of urban residents, but also the fierce competition between similar tourism attractions in this area. Therefore, considering the difficulty to reform the vacation arrangement, it is recommended that measures should be taken to make full use of tourism resources in these villages and carry on specific tourism development strategies in accordance with local features.

#### 4.2. Selected tourism attractions by urban residents and their feedbacks

Tourism attraction refers to a place of interest where tourists go for its inherent or exhibited resources, mainly including the historic or cultural heritage, natural or built landscape, leisure, adventure and other amusement experience. The attractiveness of tourism destinations is reflected by the satisfaction level of tourists (Hu and Ritchie, 1993). In this sense, the quality of tourism resources exerts great influence on the attractiveness and popularity of tourism destinations. Tolstad (2014) argues that the resources of village-based tourism mainly relate to local natural landscape, unique traditional culture and time-honored history. For example, the traditional villages in Dapeng District maintain their attractiveness with the unique Hakka and Cantonese culture and beautiful natural landscape, which can be evidenced through the following analysis result.

- The connection between richness of tourism routes and urban residents' feelings

Because of the various resources in different village clusters, tourists tend to visit several destinations according to their length of stay. After observing their tourism routes, it is clear that they tend to visit nearby villages within a cluster if their length of stay is shorter than two days, which can ensure them a thorough and fulfilling travelling experience on similar tourism attractions. For example, most of tourists who have gone for a one-day return or overnight trip in Shayuchong Village would also visit Guanghu Village and Tuyang Village which are also located in Tuyang Village Cluster. These three villages bring them the similar tourism images, such as ancient pier, exquisite traditional dwellings, quiet sand beaches and flourishing plants. These images immerse tourists into the pleasant natural and cultural enjoyment. They use positive sense-groups, such as ease, relaxation, calm, respect and nature, to express their mental feelings. Among them, "ease" is the most frequently mentioned word to describe their feelings toward this tourism destination.

Tourists tend to visit several clusters that are located relatively far apart from each other if their stay period is longer. In this case, they have different feelings on different village clusters. For instance, 4% of respondents have travelled to both Tuyang Village Cluster and the individual Shuitousha Village, which are about 15 kilometers apart. These two destinations provide tourists with different tourism experiences. Different from tourists' impression in Tuyang Village Cluster, respondents use such positive adjectives as excited, stress relieved, thrilled and broad-minded to describe their feelings on Shoutousha Village where they can enjoy different kinds of water sports on the sea. From the above observation, it can be concluded that the higher richness of tourism routes are, the more kinds of travelling feelings tourists can experience. In other words, different tourism images can help urban residents obtain emotional release in different ways.

- The connection between development degree of tourism destinations and urban residents' feelings

According to the survey, the top three popular village clusters are Longqi Bay Village Cluster in Dapeng Town, Xichong Village Cluster and Dongchong Village Cluster in Nan'ao Town (see Table 2). These clusters are popular among all the three age groups. The reason why they have the capability to attract large number of tourists is that they are the most developed and mature tourism destinations in this region. Longqi Bay Village Cluster is a well-planned and developed tourism spot by local government, where tourists can not only appreciate the ancient history of Pengcheng Village and Buddhism culture in Dongcun Village, but also experience the slow life in Jiaochangwei Village, a distinctive coastal village featuring folk guesthouses (see Figure 3). In addition to the advantages of inherited resources, the supporting facilities and infrastructure in Longqi Bay cluster are well equipped. Realizing its potential, the local government has invested a large amount of money to build the road system, protect natural landscape, and rehabilitate historic buildings into different amenities for locals and tourists, such as hotels, book shops, museums and coffee bars. Xichong Village Cluster and Dongchong Village Cluster open their high-class natural sand beach to the tourists for coastal entertainment activities and water sports (see Figure 4). The majority of local villagers have renovated their own houses to provide tourists with such supporting facilities as guesthouses, homestay hotels, restaurants and shops under the guidance of local governments and community organizations. In addition, they have also developed their own web pages where tourists can make hotel booking reservations and keep informed on their updates of tourism activities and events.



It is through these measures that reputation of the tourism brand is established and spread. In contrast, other village clusters still need a long way to go. Currently, their core attractions and supporting facilities cannot satisfy the demand of tourists. Although rare respondents have visited the underdeveloped villages out of curiosity, their mental feelings are not pleasant enough to support a second trip. When they are asked to describe the trip to these underdeveloped destinations, most of the interviewed tend to use sense groups with negative psychological implications, such as unsafe, dirty and inconvenient. Therefore, it is evident that the quality of supporting facilities directly correlates with the travelling feelings of tourists. The higher development degree the destinations have, the more positive feelings the tourists tend to hold.

Table 2. The main tourism attractions, images and the tourists' feelings of the top three popular village clustersz

Source: compiled by author

Village Cluster	Tourism Attractions	Tourists' feelings
		(ranked based on times written by the respondents )
Longqi Bay Village Cluster	1) ancient history of Pengcheng village	1) cultural deposits;
	2) buddhist culture in Dongcun Village	2) ease and calm
	3) slow life in Jiaochangwei Village, a distinctive coastal settlement	3) broadminded;
	4) well-equipped facilities and infrastructure	4) hospitable and friendly, 5) convenient 6) comfortable
Xichong Village Cluster and Dongchong Village Cluster	1) high-class natural sandbeach where tourists can enjoy all kinds of coastal entertainment activities and marine sports.	1) excited and thrilled;
	2) distinctive tourism supporting facilities	2) distinctive
	3) good promotion on the Internet	3) natural;
		4) relieved 5) friendly and hospitable 6) romantic

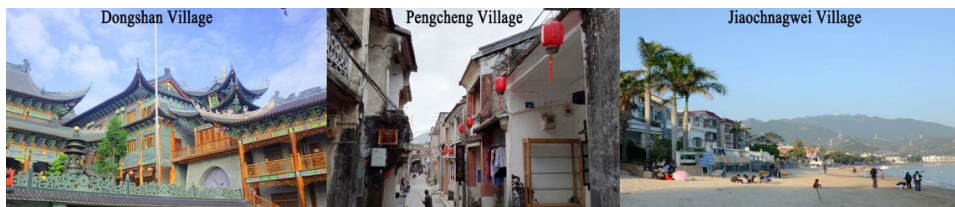


Figure 3. The main tourism images of Longqi Bay Village Cluster



Figure 4. The main tourism images of Xichong and Dongchong Village Cluster

- The hot-spot villages favored by different age groups

Through analyzing the tourism destinations favored by different age groups, it is obvious that different groups have different choices on the selection of traditional peri-urban villages. Senior tourists usually prefer villages with relatively quiet environment and unique local culture. According to the statistics, the top three popular tourism villages

avored by senior people are Pengcheng Village, Shayuchong Village and Dongcun Village respectively. For example, they can visit the Dongshan Buddhist Temple in Dongcun Village where they can experience the Buddhism culture and taste the temple vegetarian diet. For majority of the tourists below 60 years old, they prefer joining in exciting and thrilled tourism activities, such as water sports and sand beach activities. Data from the study demonstrate that Dongchong Village, Xichong Village and Jiaochangwei Village are the top three most popular tourism destinations for this age group.

## 5. Conclusion

The survey reveals several useful takeaways on the future planning and construction of traditional peri-urban villages. Aiming at strengthening the positive feelings of tourists, effective measures should be taken in these villages, such as maintaining the authenticity of inherited resources, improving the quality of supporting facilities, promoting coordination between different villages and village clusters, and planning human-centered tourism routes. Firstly, the authenticity of both natural and cultural resources is unquestionably the most valuable capital for traditional peri-urban villages, which are situated immediately nearby the brand-new crowded concrete forest of Shenzhen. The reason why urban residents want to visit these destinations is that they are thirst for the original landscape, culture and lifestyle in the peri-urban villages which are totally different from those in urban centers. Therefore, measures should be taken to protect these villages from being further swallowed by rapid urbanization. In this regard, for example, the Shenzhen City Government has taken the initiative to establish the Fundamental Ecological Control Line in 2005. Secondly, it is urgent to improve the tourism supporting facilities and infrastructure. For example, the access to tourism destinations can be improved by building new roads or greenways and promoting public transportation. Accommodation capacity can be enlarged through renovating the villagers' dwellings. Thirdly, the concept of regional integrated development should be introduced to the traditional peri-urban villages. Currently speaking, the inconsistency of development strategies among different villages and their clusters is evident and is going to hinder the future development and branding of the whole area in the long run. It is suggested that different local governments should outstand to make regional tourism planning together. Last but not the least, through coordinating resources of different villages, more human-centered tourism routes should be planned. According to our survey, it is of great significance to increase the richness and interests of tourism routes in the peri-urban area aiming at promote its overall competitiveness.

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